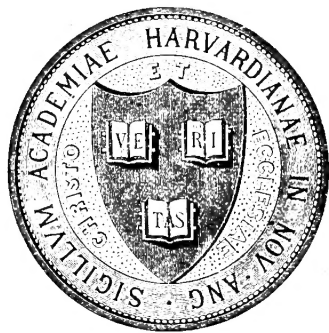


Job, H. K. - In the Cape Sable wilderness.

(1903)

A-J[ob]
Cape Sable
1903

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Baby Goes A-Nutting.

some erratic autumn when the chills and fever are belated, when September loiters in summer's lap, and when the woods change their tints, not by the forcing process of frost, but by natural ripening. The chestnut burrs and the tough cases of the walnut brown but do not burst. Then in mid-October and in the mist of the Indian summer comes suddenly a sharp, windless frost and at its close the nut trees hang heavy, each burr open, the nuts full ripe and falling at the gentlest touch.

In the lexicon of athletics nutting has hardly its word. It is the song of the boy

rather than the sport of the man. It has no acute rivalries, no headlines in the newspapers, no score cards, no records. But it owns its muscle training in the gymnasium of the tree top, its self-culture in the wisdom of the forest, its minor epics, its wealth of memories. The old nut-gatherer may dwell in the thick homes of men, yet, as each autumn barter its greenery for old gold and the red maples signal from hill to hill he hears again the partridge drum in the wood, listens to the rustle of the leaf and sees the harvest of chestnut and hickory drooping to its fall.



Nor Does It Appeal to the Boys Only.



White Ibises in "Flight-Line" for Rookery.

IN THE CAPE SABLE WILDERNESS *

By HERBERT K. JOB

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

IT was a cool, sparkling morning with a bracing northerly wind, the 26th of April, when we shoved the tender over the slippery "soap-flat," and stood upon the shore of the southernmost mainland in the United States. An almost unbroken wilderness lay before us, with all its interesting possibilities. A handful of settlers had taken up government claims along the shore, and built their rude cottages or curious palmetto shacks. Back from the strip of timber along the water's edge is a moderate area of marshy prairie which is flooded in the summer rainy season. Aside from this, all the Cape Sable peninsula is a wild, tangled, pathless mangrove swamp, extending back a number

of miles to the open saw-grass marshes of the Everglades. In the embraces of this swamp lie a series of shallow lakes with muddy bottoms, connected by various channels through the thickets, and more or less overflowed by the sea, especially when strong on-shore winds heap up the waters into the shallow bays. The whole region is as flat as a floor, and hardly above the level of the sea.

The first lake we visited after an arduous tramp over mangrove roots and through the jungle was a mile long, with densely wooded shores, a mere layer of water over a bed of mud of the consistency of molasses. Up near the further end we could see an islet with a lot of snow-white birds roosting on the trees, and, as we neared, I saw that they were the great wood ibis—technically, a stork

* This is the second of a series of articles by Mr. Job, illustrated by photographs he made during a recent trip taken especially for OUTING into this great untraveled swamp land.

—the American representative of that much reputed bird of the Orient, and, like it, our bird is also an imposing creature, standing nearly as high as a man, and clad in spotless white, save for the black extremities of the wings. The stork is apt to nest high; in the interior of Florida I have found them nesting more than a hundred feet from the ground, in inaccessible security. Here it was delightful to see them on the tops of low mangroves, evidently breeding. And so it proved. The great birds left when we were at quite a distance, and circled far off over the swamp, together with a vagrant crew of buzzards.

As we landed on the muddy islet densely overgrown with red mangroves, we heard the hoarse voices of young birds beyond, that in almost human tones seemed to reiterate, "Get out, get out." It was not easy to transport the cameras over the treacherous tract full of deceitful mud-holes, but after a struggle I arrived under the nests, whitewashed and stinking. Very soon I was overlooking them. There

were eighteen, all told, within an area of a few rods, and each contained two or three young birds, pure white in color, about the size of large pullets, with heavy-looking bills. It was the first time in my life that I had looked into a stork's nest, and happy was I in the blazing Florida sun, upon the mangrove-tops.

To photograph these stork houses, which were merely large platforms of sticks, proved to be a problem indeed. Built some fifteen feet from the ground, upon the topmost twigs of very slender trees, almost bushes, it was hard enough to get one's head above them, to say nothing of the camera; and, of course, there was nothing on which to fasten the instrument. Finally I selected the most convenient trees, tied several of them together with cord, and had the guide hold them up as I mounted and stood gingerly on the top, overlooking the nests, but with nothing to hold on to. With no less care I hoisted up my ten-pound 5x7 camera, and, thanks to the good light, was able to make several snap-shot pictures. This

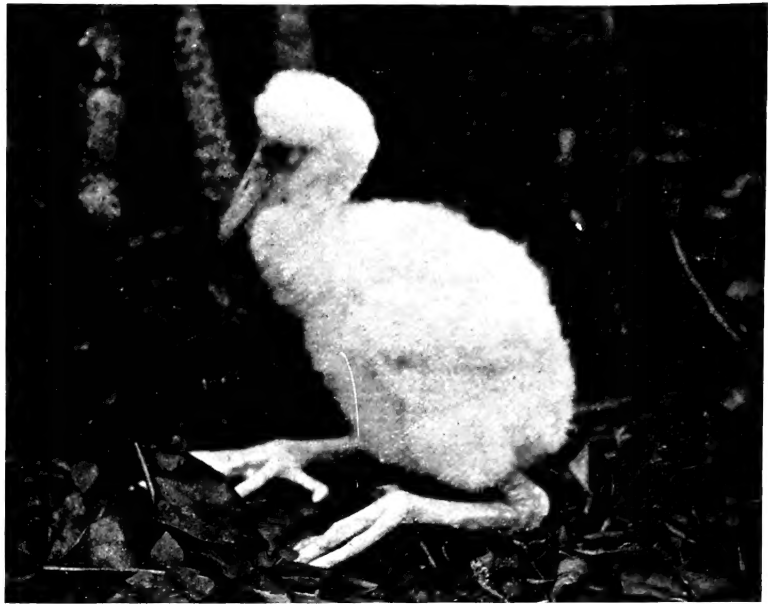


White Ibises.

being done, I descended safely, taking with me one of the young ibises, which I posed for a portrait upon the ground.

Along the "Capes" there are no mud-flats, but deep water close in to the fine beach of shell-sand. Here a chain of lakes approaches near the coast, and we took the opportunity to explore them.

The first was several miles long. We poled past several little mangrove islands, starting some brown pelicans and cormorants from some of them where they were roosting on dead stubs. Then we followed a narrow channel through the mangrove forest into the next lake, white ibises and yellow-crowned night herons flying up before us to enliven the scene. The next lake was also very shallow, with mud-flats here and there, on which were scattered quite a host of birds. Conspicuous and noisy were a flock of laughing gulls.



A Fledgling Wood Ibis.

Less conspicuous, but more interesting to me were the shore-bird ranks both in this spot and as seen during the day. Right before us on the flat a splendid band of the large black-breast plover, and around them a humbler host of sand-pipers, ring-necks, dowitchers, and the like, were feeding, sedately or nimbly, as the case might be. But dwarfing them into insignificance by physical contrast stood sleepily a pair of splendid white



Young Wood Ibises in Their Nest.



A Young White Ibis.—These are dark in color, while young wood ibises are white.

pelicans, with bodies as large and plump as the roundest pillows of the daintiest couch. I skulked along shore under shelter of the forest till I was delightfully near the unconscious birds, and ready for an exposure—when away they went, alarmed, evidently, by the boat. They alit about a mile off on a flat, where I stalked them under cover of an island and secured some telephoto pictures, though at longer range than I could wish. As soon as I

showed myself, they were up and away.

We visited in all four or five connected lakes, examining a number of islands, but without finding any rookeries or breeding birds, or seeing any more white pelicans. These last were plenty here a month ago, but they had now evidently departed for their northern breeding-grounds, and there is no likelihood that the species ever breeds in Florida. Yet we

were glad that we visited this chain of lakes. Hawks and eagles circled about, herons and ibises flapped along, shore-birds of many interesting varieties prodded the mud and whistled their piping notes. In fact, nature was so lavish that, in one narrow place in the lake between an island and the shore, two young tarpon of fair size for eating leaped into the boat.

After the rest of the party had returned home I camped for a week with a guide

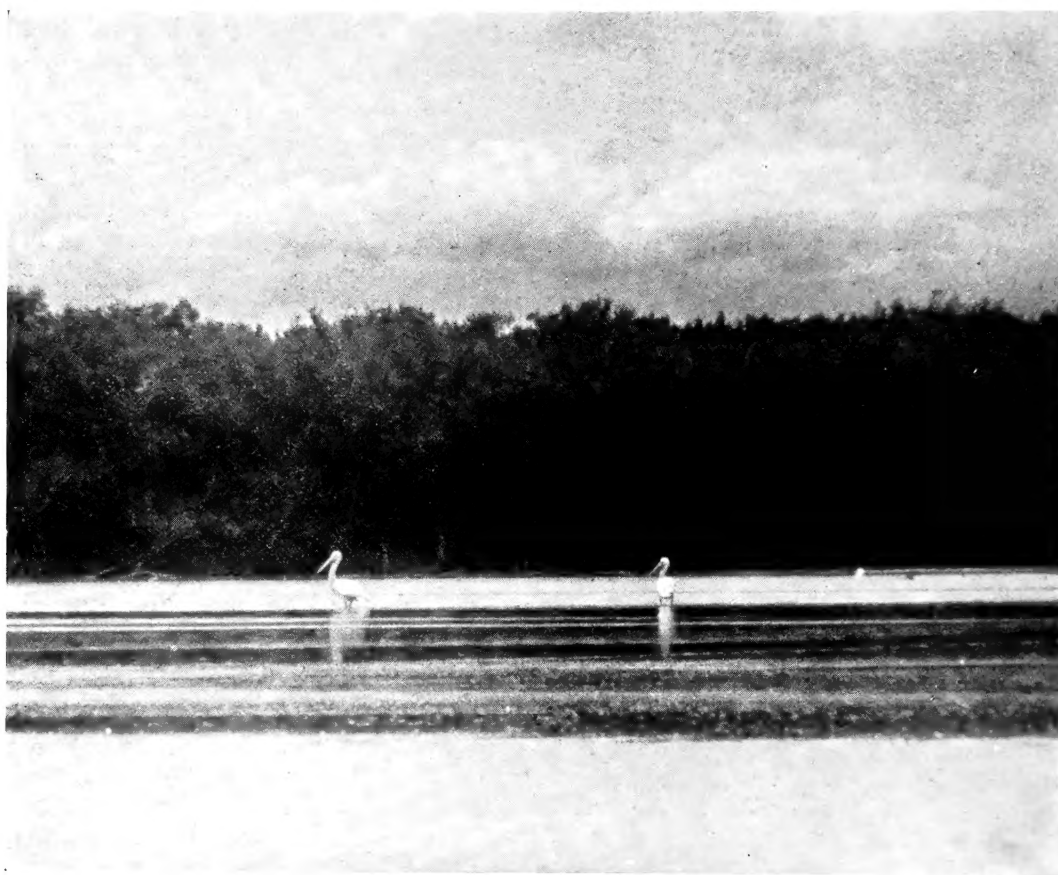


Young Wood Ibises in Nest.

at the old spot east of Cape Sable. Poor forlorn country! Though the soil is suitable for the raising of tropical fruits, the lack of fresh water and the terrible insect scourge makes it simply torture to stay there. Clouds of mosquitoes give their victim not a moment's peace. One must wear thick clothes, and either don gloves and a screen hat or fight all the time. In camp must be maintained a constant blinding smudge of dead wood of the black mangrove, which "skeets" and men

mule can support life in such a country, and that hardy beast only by being kept in a screened stable and bundled up in burlap when taken out to work.

One of my most interesting and roughest excursions was to a lake six miles away, or rather to its vicinity. When we neared the edge of the lake, which was more properly a sort of everglade morass, and tried to get into the swampy woods where the birds were flying into the rookery, troubles began, compared with which the



The Last Linger White Pelicans.

alike detest. Photography under these circumstances is comparable to the Spanish Inquisition. Settlers who pretend to any comfort at all screen their houses and keep outside the door a brush of palmetto leaves with which every visitor must beat off the stinging swarm before dodging within. Other settlers keep the smudge-pot going and live in smoke. There are also swarms of a terrible great fly, an inch and a quarter in length, whose bite is like a knife-thrust, with corresponding flow of blood. No domestic animal except the

clouds of "skeets" were as nothing. Rivers of soft treacle-like mud proved absolutely impassable. Finally we got across a wide ditch, and encountered a tract of impenetrable dead saw-grass. A match was applied, and, after the roaring cauldron of flame had passed, we went on. Then we encountered a tropical jungle—a solid mass of roots, vines, scrub palmetto and the like. The guide went forward with his caseknife, and cut openings, through which we crawled. After half an hour of this came a saw-grass bog quar-

ter of a mile wide. How we ever managed to flounder across, dragging one another out of holes, I hardly know. But we reached, at length, the swampy tract of woods into which returning ibises, herons and egrets were dropping, and from which we could hear a confused murmur of distant squawking.

I shall never forget the sight which greeted me as I emerged from the slough and came through the woods to the edge of one of the impassable muddy bayous,

left the nests. The woods were fairly alive with them, and droves raced over the ground under the mangroves, or climbed among the branches in all directions.

Next in abundance was the little Louisiana heron, the common blue-gray species with white under-parts, whose young were in about the same condition as the young ibises, and mingled with them. Across the bayou we could hear, but not see, the large, graceful snow-white American egrets and their young. As with the peacock,



In the Mangrove Swamp.

about thirty feet wide, bordered by thickets of mangroves. The trees were fairly alive with splendid great birds and their half-grown young. The most abundant was the white ibis, a fine creature, snow-white, with black wing-tips and brilliant red legs and bills, both long, the latter down-curved. They are locally called "white curlews," and are esteemed one of the best food-birds of the region. Their young are of a blackish-gray color, with white on the rump, and were now in the stage when, though unable to fly, they had

beauty of form and plumage is not matched with sweetness of song, and this lovely dream of a bird speaks in harshest rattling grunts. Much the same is true of the elegant little snowy heron, a few of which we could see dropping into the swamp beyond our muddy Jordan. These last two species are the wearers of the so-called "aigrette" plumes, the fatal ornament which has led almost to their extermination.

But what made me thrill with special excitement was the sight of half a dozen



Young White Ibises and Louisiana Herons.

or so of large rosy-pink birds quietly perched upon the trees just opposite us across the barrier, the roseate spoonbills on their nesting-ground. What a spectacle—the dark green mangrove foliage dotted with ibises of dazzling whiteness, “pink curlews” (the local name), and blue-tinted herons! I felt that I had here reached the high-water mark of spectacular sights in the bird-world. Wherever I may penetrate in future wanderings, I never hope to see anything to surpass, or perhaps to equal, that upon which I then gazed. This is the last remnant and the last place of refuge of hosts of innocent, exquisite creatures slaughtered for a brutal millinery folly.

Climbing a tree, to get above the undergrowth, I screwed my 4 x 5 camera to a limb and proceeded to take pictures of the surrounding birds, with telephoto attachment and with long-focus single lens. Then, with this camera and the 5 x 7, I followed along the bayou, hoping to find some way to cross. Every time I tumbled into a mud-hole or snapped a twig, there was wild confusion. The air was white with ibises.

The day was now nearly gone, and yet we had not crossed the bayou into the main part of the rookery. But at length we reached a place where a small tree had fallen across, and managed to reach the other shore. The very first nest which I examined, about five feet from the ground, in a crotch, contained four young snowy herons. While I was standing there, the queenly mother, exquisite with her back-load of elegant drooping “aigrette” plumes, flew down and fed her white-robed princely children. About twenty-five feet up the next tree was another nest of twigs in a fork of the main trunk. A sort of rosy flush around its edge led me to climb to it, and I gazed upon three young roseate spoonbills. They were, perhaps, one-third grown, and were clad in a rosy-pink down, through which feathers of the same hue, especially on the wings, were sprouting.

My plates were nearly all used up, and I tried to expend the few remaining ones judiciously amongst this mass of wonderful material. Then the guide fairly dragged me back, for it was very necessary to be out of the morass before sun-down.

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